

Wisconsin Folks: Masters of Tradition



Else Bigton (b. 1956) is a native of Ålesund, Norway. She trained as a cabinetmaker at the Hjerleid wood carving school in Norway where she met her husband Phillip Odden. Together they founded Norsk Wood Works in Barronett and make their living as skilled craftspeople. Although she has been teaching classes in woodcarving for more than three decades, she had never taught cabinet making because it requires one-to-one instruction, which the Wisconsin Arts Board award made possible. “The grant allowed me to revisit old skills

learned from my Masters in Norway.”

“For my family and me, we live our Norwegian and American culture every day; it is a lifestyle. We live on a farm where we made our house to look like a farm house from Gudbrandsdalen, Norway, where Phil’s family came from. Our farm once belonged to his uncle Ole. We have Norwegian Fjord horses and we make our living doing Norwegian woodcarving. Our son Tor Ole attended St. Olaf college. He is bilingual and he plays the Hardanger fiddle.”

Else took on Colby Booth as an apprentice. The goal was for Colby to build a traditional Norwegian trunk with a “leddik” (a compartment inside with a secret bottom) from rough lumber using many hand tools and learning the old technique of hand cut dove tails. Once constructed, he fully carved the trunk with traditional Norwegian acanthus design, plus a carved scene, and painted it using traditional painting techniques. Else purposefully chose a large complicated project for the apprenticeship because she wanted Colby to accomplish a piece to be really proud of, and to inspire others.

Colby learned how to best select lumber and work with a “live” material that shrinks and swells. He experienced making something that will last for generations. A final presentation was at the Dovre Lodge of Sons of Norway in Barron. Colby also displayed the trunk with explanatory text at the Sand Creek library and city hall. This experience taught Colby, “There is art in the process of building an item, not just the final outcome.”

“Hand techniques allow much more creativity and it is important to keep these skills alive.” Else Bigton